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Have we had enough of the nanny employer?

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14-18 minutes

The workplace is in the throes of menopause. Or so it would seem from the deluge of emails I receive on the topic. Recently, a top London law firm contacted me about their trailblazing strategy to embolden women to share their experiences of their dwindling hormones and sleeplessness. I didn't have the heart to tell them several of their rivals had beaten them to it.

What was going on? Once the topic was a private matter, yet now here it was, not just whispered about at water coolers, but tackled as an official corporate priority in a slew of memos.

Partly, it is the result of high-profile campaigns to bring menopause into the open. But there is something bigger at play: a revolution in workplace culture leading to the rise and rise of what you might call the nanny employer. Increasingly, employers are attending to staff's wellbeing, particularly

mental health, and delving into matters that were previously viewed as personal.

The trend has been growing for years. Then the pandemic happened. In recent months my inbox has been swamped by emails from one white-collar company or another declaring new benefits: meditation apps, psychologists or payments for exercise equipment. As social restrictions lifted and returned, employers introduced wellness days. LinkedIn went a step further and announced a whole week, followed by Bumble, the dating app.

It was not just the perks but also managers' attitudes. A report by McKinsey at the end of last year put it: "What has effectively been a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach to mental health in the workplace is becoming instead 'do ask, do tell, let's talk'." The effect has been to create a kind of corporate intimacy, with Zoom as the enabler, encouraging employers to step into employees' homes. Goldman Sachs ran virtual storytelling sessions for the children of staff — the sort of role usually assigned to a nanny, not an investment bank.

This desire to help employees was of course also pragmatic. As our personal lives fused with our work ones in the pandemic, employers sought to buoy morale and keep staff productive. Such efforts could be intrusive, fake or clumsy but often they were welcome. I have seen employers help staff struggle with anxiety or grief and witnessed first-hand how someone with depression in precarious employment

was cast adrift and isolated.

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But how much intrusion into our private lives do we want from our employers? Do we want a nanny employer to advise, cajole and coddle, or a relationship altogether more transactional?

The nanny employer tends to its workforce's physical and mental health in various ways. Banks and law firms pay for an array of therapists and psychiatrists, meditation instructors and advisers on work-life balance. This is on top of the employee assistance programmes (helplines that advise on personal and practical issues that might have an impact on work performance) and gym subsidies. Google's canteens nudge employees to make healthy choices. In its annual report, Björn Borg, the sportswear company, calculates its workforce's average physiological age as 27, according to a fitness assessment, five years younger than their actual average age of 32. Every Friday workers get together for group exercise sessions at 11am, moving to Instagram when social distancing became necessary. One sleep expert advising executives on sleep hygiene, smartphone use and business travel told me that when he first started pitching his services 15 years ago, he struggled to convince employers who viewed the matter as a private issue for workers. Now he is in demand.

The wellness industry is partly responsible, targeting the workplace as a fresh market — the US is particularly lucrative as employers want fitter employees to reduce the costs of healthcare insurance. Across the world, the workplace wellness sector grew 4.6 per cent annually between 2017 and 2019, to a high of $52.2bn, according to the Global Wellness Institute, an international non-profit.

The nanny employer is hardly new, of course. David Gray, author of *Work Better, Live Better: Motivation, Labor, and Management Ideology*, notes that some manufacturers in the 19th century wanted workers to feel nurtured and to “see themselves as beneficiaries of employer wellbeing, [promoting] the progressive idea to see the worker as a whole and a rejection of the worker as a cog in the machine” with such things as hobby shows, where factories held exhibitions of workers’ paintings.

The rise of the human relations movement led by Elton Mayo in the 1930s was based on the assumption that “good managers distinguish themselves from bad ones by their ability to harness people’s emotions”, according to André Spicer and Carl Cederström in *The Wellness Syndrome*. “Pay recognition to your workforce and you will be paid back manifold.”

In the 2000s, the spread of positive psychology and behavioural economics prompted the growth of consultants attending to the minds of knowledge workers. The

sociologist Will Davies, author of *The Happiness Industry*, pointed out that “in an economy based in large part on services, enthusiasm, dynamism and optimism are vital workplace resources.”

Changes in the workforce have played a role. There are more women in it, for a start. Office life was founded around a breadwinning man unconcerned by the messiness of life because his wife looked after it. One female executive in financial services put it to me thus: “This was a world of work created by men, for men.” As dual working couples became the norm, the workplace had to adapt. Raina Brands, associate professor at UCL School of Management, says: “If you are an organisation that has greedy jobs [gobbling up time], you have to put support structures in place.”

Some point to the growth of “workism” — the idea that work has become a kind of religion, fulfilling workers’ spiritual needs and shaping their identity. Accordingly, a job should provide more than just money but self-actualisation, purpose and nurture too.

There has also been a cultural shift. People are increasingly open about issues that used to be considered private. Recently I mentioned over dinner a family friend’s mental health problems. I paused to explain to my 10-year-old who rolled his eyes at my patronising tone. It was redundant, teachers talk about these things at school all the time, he said.

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Bobby Duffy, the professor of public policy at King's College London and author of *Generations*, says that social media encourages people to share their mental health problems, which are no longer seen as a weakness. Young people "lead the way, and other cohorts follow to varying degrees . . . You see similar patterns in our attitudes to homosexuality, gender, race. Lessons from those comparisons suggest this isn't a fad that will decrease, but a fundamental shift in norms."

This translates to the workplace. A global survey by LinkedIn, the social networking site, found that among respondents, 66 per cent of Gen Z and 51 per cent of millennials wanted more organisational investment in mental health and wellness — compared with 41 per cent of Gen X and 31 per cent of baby boomers.

When Covid-19 arrived, I assumed that wellbeing initiatives would evaporate, deemed a frippery amid so much uncertainty — just as a family might cut the nanny in straitened times. Those early days of lockdowns put a brake on corporate spending on wellbeing. In 2020, it came down 7 per cent on the year before to $48.5bn, according to the Global Wellness Institute.

Nonetheless, digital apps offering a relatively cheap and easy way for workers to practise meditation and soothe their

anxious thoughts became common. Headspace, which includes the Financial Times, Starbucks and Unilever among its 3,500 clients, saw a 500 per cent increase in companies' requests for the app. Alexi Robichaux, co-founder of BetterUp, a coaching and mental health platform for employees, described the pandemic as the equivalent of the "dotcom boom for mental health".

Extraordinary times required extraordinary measures. Employers became solicitous of their staff's wellbeing. At the start of the pandemic, Allen & Overy, the law firm, asked managers to speak to team members every 48 hours to find out how they were coping. Sir Ian Cheshire, who has worked in retail for decades notably as chief executive of Kingfisher and is now chair of the broadcaster Channel 4, as well as the Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health, says that in more than a decade of campaigning on mental health and the workplace he did not "remember a time like this".

The report of the Global Wellness Institute came to the same conclusion. "Some employers are beginning to adopt [an] approach that encompasses company culture, hierarchy, leadership style, workflow . . . The pandemic has given employers a forceful nudge."

When social restrictions lifted, some organisations offered perks such as sensory deprivation tanks and retreats. Last summer, I escaped for a day to the Surrey Hills to one run by

The Life Adventure. Its most popular workshops among employers were Breathwork, Forest Bathing, Journaling and Storytelling and Manifestation. My brain unfurled. If this is the future of work, I thought, sign me up.

Not everyone agrees. Last year, Jason Fried, chief executive of 37signals, a small US software company best known for its Basecamp project management tool, decided to end what he described as “paternalistic benefits”. “For years,” he explained in a [blog post](), “we’ve offered a fitness benefit, a wellness allowance, a farmer’s market share, and continuing education allowances. They felt good at the time, but we’ve had a change of heart . . . By providing funds for certain things, we’re getting too deep into nudging people’s personal, individual choices.”

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Instead, they decided to boost employees’ pay and introduce 10 per cent profit sharing, so that “people can spend on whatever they’d like, privately, without company involvement or judgment”. I spoke to him about his reasons for going against the tide. “We were too involved in [employees’] personal lives. We paid for people’s fresh fruit and massage expenses and gym. It became uncomfortable. We shouldn’t tell you to work out or go to the gym.”

The cuts to “paternalistic benefits” were made at the same time as employees were banned from talking about politics on work channels, which triggered a social-media storm

accusing leadership of quashing internal debate and the departure of about a third of the workforce. Is there not a tension between ending infantilising benefits and telling employees some topics are off-limits? “Some people might argue that’s paternalistic, I think it’s managing [to achieve work] goals.” Fried feels vindicated about both moves, pointing out the company’s workforce has grown back bigger.

It remains the case, as ever, that the primary interest of employers is productivity. In a survey of Financial Times readers last year, many complained that the language of empathy did not match reality. Their managers might implore them to take as much time as they need but rarely followed with a reduction in workload. Goldman might have told stories to children, but it was also publicly criticised by a group of junior bankers for working excessive hours. “I can’t sleep any more because my anxiety levels are through the roof,” said one. Meanwhile many other workers — such as those on zero-hours contracts — could only dream of a workplace meditation app.

A survey by the City Mental Health Alliance, a non-profit organisation working with professional services firms, found that 60 per cent said they had experienced burnout due to protracted work stress, and 61 per cent said that blurred lines between work and home had taken its toll. Jeffrey Pfeffer, the author of *Dying for a Paycheck*, told me “few

employers have — or will — address the root causes of workplace toxicity.” The nanny could be disconnected from reality, or a talisman to ward off criticism and lawsuits.

Just as the surveillance state is the flip side of the nanny state, so too for employers, some argue. Andrew Pakes, deputy general secretary of Prospect, a union for engineers and civil servants, highlights that employers are using software “to check what websites we are looking [at], judge our moods and to make decisions about whether we are paying attention . . . We need to be careful to ensure wellbeing doesn’t become [part] of invasive and intrusive monitoring practices.”

Those catch-ups with your manager might have been done with the best of intentions but can you be sure the information you disclosed about a partner’s illness, or your caring duties, will not be used against you? Sarah Taylor, an employment lawyer at Stevens & Bolton, says there is a risk decisions about “promotions have been made with this personal knowledge”.

Emboldened by the corporate intimacy forged in the past two years, there are signs the nanny employer is here to stay. Mary Bilbrey, global chief human resources officer of JLL, the property group, believes the “Great Resignation”, has delivered a clear message from employees: “‘I now want more attention, more care.’ They want their employers to show investment in care.”

Some employers have taken this to heart, such as the law firm that set up a fertility officer to act as a sounding board and champion for lawyers considering having a child or struggling with conception. Others have had enough of what they see as indulging employees and want to curtail the influence of human resources officers whose role has been enhanced by the pandemic. This tension is being played out in the debate over the return to the office between the bosses who want their staff back at HQ and those workers who are resisting the commute and the clutches of their employer.

David D'Souza, membership director of the CIPD, says: "Some people want to just go to work, do it transactionally and go home." Others will have been changed by the pandemic and expect support, he says.

As we emerge from the great blur of the pandemic, the economy will decide how much power employers and employees have to dictate the terms of their relationship. With inflation rising, many employers will seek to reduce costs, no doubt testing their caring side. But even so, some employees may have changed their expectations of their managers. As one HR director summed it up: "I may not want to share every detail of my life. But I do want you to understand that I have one."

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Data visualisation by [Steven Bernard]

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